projectextramile
PREVENTING ALCOHOL-RELATED HARM

Advocating for evidence-based policies and practices
to prevent and reduce alcohol-related harms.

OMAHA COALITION MEETING
Wednesday, August 12, 2026
9 a.m.

Please use to sign-in:

A G E N D A

I. Welcome and Introductions

II. Review of the May 13, 2026 Meeting Minutes
(please contact PEM staff with corrections)

III. Engaging with PHAN for Community Health and Safety
Julie Lubisi, Public Health Association of Nebraska

IV. Focus Area Updates

a. Local
   i. Three Fatal DUI Crashes
   ii. Nebraska Impaired Driving Summit

b. Policy
   i. LCC feedback survey
   ii. LCC compliance check penalty reductions

c. Enforcement
   i. End of Summer compliance checks

d. Youth
   i. Youth Leadership Retreat
   ii. Youth Leadership Network – August 17th at 7:00 p.m.

e. Awareness
   i. Local View: Preventable tragedies demand action
   ii. June-August Research Summaries available at www.projectextramile.org

V. Additional Discussion/Announcements

VI. Adjournment and Next Meeting Date: **September 9 @ 9 a.m. – Division of Behavioral Health re: State Epidemiological Profile**
UNO's Community Engagement Center, Room 209

IMPORTANT UPCOMING EVENTS
Nebraska Liquor Control Commission Hearings – September 9, 2026

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PROJECT EXTRA MILE

OMAHA METRO AREA
COALITION MEETING MINUTES
May 13, 2026

I. Call to Order: Chris Wagner called the meeting to order at 9:00 a.m.

II. Welcome and Introductions: Coalition members and speakers in attendance in: Michael Glantz, Ashley Pick, Maggie Ballard, Katie Furlong, Paul Letcher, Sharona Ernst, Derek Schwartz, and Nicholas Sauma. Coalition members in attendance via Zoom: Lanette Richards, Tom Safranek, Brian Ortner, Courtney Zimbelman-Burt, Suzanne Crane, Tracy Burmeister, Jessica Rocha, Jona Beck, Elizabeth Woods, Natalie Kingston, Alvin McCruel, Loel Schettler, Nigel Wrangham, Jayna Schaaf, King Maxwell, Sara Mitchell, Regina Sullivan, and Jacqueline Alba. Staff members: Chris Wagner and Beatha Kliewer.

III. Approval of Minutes: The minutes from the April 8th meeting were included in the coalition meeting packet. No additions or corrections were made.

IV. Transforming Prevention Through Authentic Youth-Adult Partnerships: Nigel Wrangham presented on challenges and opportunities related to youth leadership in prevention efforts, highlighting changes in engagement approaches over time. He emphasized the importance of rethinking how youth are engaged in prevention work, with a greater focus on meaningful collaboration and shared leadership between youth and adults. Nigel also discussed common misconceptions about youth engagement and strategies for creating more authentic and effective involvement opportunities. Nigel and PEM also discussed the upcoming Youth Leadership Retreat. A past youth attendee shared positive feedback about the retreat, noting its focus on leadership development, relationship-building, and interactive activities in a supportive environment.

V. Focus Area Updates
   a. Local
      i. Chris Wanger shared information about a liquor license in North Omaha that was required to reapply for their license by the city council. The license was granted on the basis of the business agreeing to numerous conditions including security measures and camera systems linked to the Omaha Police Department.
   b. Policy
      i. Wagner announced that due to lack of proper notice for the Department of Agriculture's rulemaking hearing on THC in food products, the hearing has to be postponed. Wrangham shared his approach to youth education about cannabis and alcohol, emphasizing the importance of connecting personal consequences to broader social and economic factors while avoiding political agendas.
      ii. The group discussed recent legislative developments, including the failure of near-beer deregulation and the passage of a bottle club bill that increases penalties for unlicensed alcohol sales.

c. Enforcement
    i. Two days of law enforcement trainings on alcohol compliance check operations brought together 29 participants from 18 agencies and coalitions.
    ii. Wagner invited coalition members to respond to the LCC's Engagement Survey to provide a community voice about what the LCC should do to improve its work in protecting the public health and safety of Nebraskans.
d. Youth
    i. The Youth Leadership Retreat will take place on June 1-3 with 20 participants at Haven150 in Omaha.

VI. Awareness:
a. Wagner presented at the April PHAN Café on the alcohol & cancer link.
b. Earned media this month included an op-ed for Alcohol Awareness Month in the Omaha World Herald and an interview in the Lincoln Journal Star on about the UNL late-night ride program.
c. The May Research Summary will be available at www.projectextramile.org/ResearchSummary

VII. Additional Discussion/Announcements: none

VIII. Adjournment and Next Meeting Date: The meeting was adjourned at 10:00 a.m.

PROJECT EXTRA MILE

YOUTH LEADERSHIP NETWORK

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT. ADVOCACY. AWARENESS. ACTION

READY TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

Youth in grades 8-12 in the Omaha Metro Area are invited to join Project Extra Mile's Youth Leadership Network. Members will learn about the harms of excessive alcohol use in our community, develop the leadership skills needed to make real change, and put those skills into action!

FOCUSING ON EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO LEAD

Project Extra Mile has been creating community change for over 25 years and we are passionate about reducing alcohol-related harms in our community. In the Youth Leadership Network, we focus on teaching and practicing the skills needed to create change. Youth will receive expert guidance on projects that will utilize media literacy, public speaking, advocacy, problem-solving, and community organizing skills that they'll develop from this initiative.

A YOUTH-LED APPROACH

We're serious about youth leadership, which is why all projects are planned and developed by the youth themselves. Youth projects over the last couple years have included hosting a town hall, meeting with state senators, creating media campaigns to raise awareness, and more!

MEET AND LEARN FROM LOCAL AND STATE POLICYMAKERS

CREATE YOUR OWN MEDIA CAMPAIGNS

LEARN HOW TO USE YOUR INDIVIDUAL LEADERSHIP STYLE

MEET NEW FRIENDS AND DEVELOP SKILLS TO LAST A LIFETIME

COLLEGE SCHOLARSHIP OPPORTUNITY AVAILABLE FOR SPRING 2027!

GROW YOUR LEADERSHIP SKILLS AND MAKE FRIENDSHIPS THAT LAST A LIFETIME

YOUTH LEADERSHIP NETWORK FALL MEETING SCHEDULE

AUGUST 17, 2026
7-8 P.M.
UNO CEC

SEPTEMBER 21, 2026
7-8 P.M.
UNO CEC

OCTOBER 19, 2026
7-8 P.M.
UNO CEC

NOVEMBER 16, 2026
7-8 P.M.
UNO CEC

DECEMBER 7, 2026
7-8 P.M.
UNO CEC

EXTRA MEETINGS AS NEEDED

YOUTH ADVOCACY DAY AT THE STATE CAPITOL SPRING 2027

YOUTH LEADERSHIP RETREAT SUMMER 2027

HOW TO JOIN

The Youth Leadership Network is open to all Omaha-area youth in grades 8 through 12 who want to grow as leaders and are interested in preventing alcohol-related harms in our community with the skills they develop. To indicate your interest in joining us for our next meeting, please fill out the form using the QR code below. YLN is completely free to join!

Register here!

WHERE WE MEET

The Youth Leadership Network meetings are held once a month at the Barbara Weitz Community Engagement Center (CEC) on the University of Nebraska-Omaha campus at 6400 Dodge Street, Omaha, NE. Parking is free and food and drinks are provided at each meeting (must register for food).

LEARN MORE!

To learn more about the Youth Leadership Network, please visit www.projectextramile.org/youth or contact us at youth@projectextramile.org or (402) 963-9047

Find us on:

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PREVENTING ALCOHOL-RELATED HARM

RESEARCH SUMMARY
Date Compiled: June 2026

Key takeaways from included research:

- A study of teens found that alcohol-related content is common across social media, TV, movies, and even posts from friends and family, increasing young people's awareness of drinking. Teens said better alcohol education, more honest portrayals of alcohol harms, stronger regulation of alcohol content, and promoting sober lifestyles could help reduce the influence of alcohol messaging.
- An Australian survey of male sports fans found that most said alcohol was not an important part of attending professional sports events, with many drinking little or no alcohol during games. Researchers say the findings suggest attitudes around sports, drinking, and masculinity may be changing, with less focus on alcohol and fewer links to aggressive behavior at games.
- Researchers studied sexually and gender-minoritized teens and found that students had different experiences in Gender-Sexuality Alliances (GSAs), including levels of support, involvement, and school victimization. Researchers did not find differences in alcohol use between the groups, but they say GSAs may still help students build healthy coping skills and provide support around substance use discussions.
- A study in Australia and New Zealand found that alcohol companies often market zero-alcohol products by promoting friendship, health, fitness, and new occasions for drinking, such as at the gym or while driving. Researchers say these campaigns may still strengthen alcohol brand recognition and suggest stronger rules are needed for marketing alcohol-free products linked to alcohol brands.
- A review of more than 100 studies found that public health messages about alcohol and cancer often focus on warning labels and commonly explain that alcohol increases cancer risk, especially breast cancer risk. Researchers say these messages can help improve public awareness and support cancer prevention when they are carefully tested with different groups of people.

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RESEARCH SUMMARY
Date Compiled: July 2026

Key takeaways from included research:

- This study found that lifetime risk of dying from an alcohol-related cause is 1 in 1,000 at about 6.5–7 drinks per week and increases to more than 1 in 100 at about 8.5 drinks per week. For men drinking 14 drinks per week, the risk increases to about 1 in 25. These findings support recommendations that adults who choose to drink should limit consumption to one drink or less per day to reduce risks of cancer, cardiovascular disease, injury, and premature death.
- A study of alcohol ads on Instagram and YouTube found that many social media alcohol advertisements may violate industry guidelines meant to protect minors and vulnerable groups. One-third of the ads were considered non-compliant, and these ads received more user engagement than ads that followed the rules. Researchers say stronger oversight and updated guidelines are needed to reduce harmful alcohol marketing online.
- Alcohol use among older adults is rising and has been linked to memory problems and dementia. A study of adults ages 60 to 75 found that an online program called “Rethink My Drink” helped participants reduce their alcohol use more than standard educational materials. While the program did not significantly improve cognitive function over one year, researchers say it shows promise as a simple and scalable way to help older adults drink less.
- A Canadian study found that cheaper alcohol was linked to higher rates of alcohol-related harm, risky drinking, and signs of alcohol use disorder. The strongest effects were seen among lower-income and Indigenous groups, suggesting that minimum alcohol pricing policies could help reduce harm and improve health equity.
- A study of nearly 6,000 alcoholic products in Australia found that more than one-third used “better for you” marketing claims such as low sugar, natural ingredients, vegan, or low alcohol. Researchers say these claims may mislead health-conscious consumers into thinking some alcohol products are healthier, highlighting the need for stronger labeling rules.
- A major 2026 review found that alcohol causes or contributes to dozens of diseases, with risk generally increasing as drinking levels increase. While some studies suggest low-to-moderate drinking may be linked to lower risk of certain heart and metabolic conditions, the overall evidence shows that alcohol's harms outweigh any potential benefits. The review also found that many alcohol-related harms can be reduced by cutting back or quitting drinking.

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RESEARCH SUMMARY
Date Compiled: August 2026

Key takeaways from included research:

- A 2026 birth cohort study found that alcohol exposure during pregnancy was linked to a greater likelihood of adolescents engaging in multiple risky behaviors, such as substance use. The findings add to evidence that prenatal alcohol exposure can have long-term effects that extend beyond childhood and into the teen years. The authors conclude that preventing alcohol use during pregnancy may help reduce a range of later behavioral and health risks for children.
- A new study found that after Utah lowered the legal blood alcohol concentration (BAC) limit for drivers from 0.08% to 0.05%, alcohol-related traffic deaths decreased more than in the six neighboring states that kept the 0.08% limit. Researchers concluded that stricter impaired-driving laws can change driver behavior and help prevent crashes and deaths on the road. The findings suggest that adopting a 0.05% BAC limit in other states could save lives and improve public safety.
- Nearly all ready-to-drink alcoholic beverages examined in this Australian study were classified as ultra-processed, containing additives such as flavorings, sweeteners, colors, and carbonating agents. Despite this, many products used marketing claims like "natural," "low sugar," or other health-focused messages that could make them appear healthier or less processed than they actually are. The researchers concluded that stronger rules for ingredient labeling and marketing are needed to help consumers make informed choices about alcohol products.
- Alcohol-related liver disease is the leading cause of liver-related illness and death, and deaths from the disease in the U.S. nearly doubled between 1999 and 2022. Because most people have few or no symptoms early on, screening people who drink heavily can help detect liver damage before it becomes severe. The most effective treatment is stopping alcohol use, which greatly lowers the risk of death and disease progression, while people with advanced liver disease may need a liver transplant. Public health policies, such as increasing alcohol prices, limiting alcohol availability, and restricting marketing, will also reduce alcohol-related harm at the population level.

North Omaha grocery store adopts changes to address crime concerns

Written by Aaron Hegarty

OMAHA, Neb. — A North Omaha grocery and liquor store will adopt new measures to address crime concerns following a unanimous city council decision.

TNA Grocery, formerly known as JNJ Grocery, will retain its liquor license. The Omaha City Council asked the shop to complete a longform liquor license application earlier this year.

North Omaha store, community push back on liquor license actionCouncil asks for additional review of north Omaha store's liquor license; Neighborhood pushes back

Omaha police identified the area of 42nd and Bedford streets last year as a crime hotspot last year.

The business agreed to contract security on weekends, connect exterior security cameras to police's network, remove alcohol advertisements from its windows to allow views outside, and join the neighborhood association.

"That neighborhood engagement piece, that community support for cleanup and litter removal. Those are all proven ways that we uplift our neighborhood. It's a great way to champion safety, beautify neighborhood, and also to ensure the success of a small business," said Councilmember Lavonya Goodwin.

Goodwin said she is excited for the first community meeting.

Op-ed: Too many Nebraskans are dying of alcohol-related cancers. Here's how to change that

Written by Chris Wagner

April is Alcohol Awareness Month. Coincidentally, it is also Esophageal and Head & Neck Cancer Awareness Month.

These awareness months have more in common than many realize. That's because even moderate alcohol consumption increases the risk of developing these and at least five other types of cancer.

According to the CDC, Nebraska has 1,001 alcohol-related deaths per year due to excessive alcohol use, with 112 of those deaths being from alcohol-attributable cancers. What's particularly troubling is that any alcohol consumption elevates your risk for developing of one of those cancers but the more you drink, the more at risk you put yourself.

That's a big problem for Nebraska. While we're middle of the road for the percentage of adults who report any drinking in the past 30 days, we're the third-worst state for binge drinking with nearly 20 percent of adults reporting binge drinking at least once in the past month.

The 2025 Surgeon General's Advisory on Alcohol and Cancer Risk made the alcohol & cancer connection even clearer. It noted that 16 percent of women who have less than one drink per week will develop an alcohol-related cancer in their lifetime.

That risk increases to 19 percent for one drink a day and 22 percent for two drinks a day. For men, the risk is lower but still notable: Less than one drink a week presents a 10 percent risk, which increases to 13 percent at two drinks per day.

The advisory recommends updating warning labels on alcoholic beverage containers to highlight cancer risk and recommended that the U.S. Dietary Guidelines account for alcohol's cancer risk so that Americans can be better informed about the health risks of alcohol consumption.

Unfortunately, the 2025-2030 Dietary Guidelines had the alcohol industry's fingerprints all over them. They removed minors under the age of 21 from the listed groups that should avoid alcohol.

The recommended limits on alcohol consumption were also replaced with a vague recommendation that Americans should "consume less alcohol for better overall health." There was also no mention of cancer or the fact that less than one drink per week increases your risk of developing an alcohol-related cancer.

Research shows that approximately 16,800 cancer deaths could be prevented if adults who drink excessively reduce their consumption to within the previously recommended limits found in the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines.

The good news is that states have the ability to regulate how alcohol is sold within their borders. It might surprise you to learn that many of our state senators understand the harms that alcohol causes in Nebraska — from the 1,001 annual deaths, to the underage drinking tragedies in the headlines, to the chronic diseases it causes, the crime, and the $1.2 billion in annual economic costs that we all pay in one way or another through our tax dollars or insurance premiums.

Omaha-area high school students spent the better part of the last two years advocating for increasing the price of alcohol (Legislative Bill 330) so that the Nebraskans who drink the most pay the most and reduce their drinking and their burden on society.

Most senators that expressed a position on the issue supported an increase in the price of alcohol that could've generated tens of millions of dollars in revenue to address our state's ongoing budget deficit. Yet the power of the alcohol industry kept the bill stuck in the Revenue Committee

A similar price increase was used in Maryland and has produced exciting results — significant reductions in in underage drinking (26%) and binge drinking (28%), adult binge drinking (17%), impaired driving among 15-34-year-olds (6%) and sexually-transmitted infections (24%). Lives were saved and Maryland communities were safer.

Evidence-based policies such as increasing the price will reduce alcohol-related cancers, crime, and economic costs. The only thing we lack is the political will needed to enact these policies. Why keep enriching the industry at the expense of our children's well-being and our community's safety? It will take a village to make this happen, but we are closer than you might think.

Chris Wagner is the executive director of Project Extra Mile, a network of community partnerships working to reduce alcohol-related harms statewide

UNL's late-night ride program takes off, but funding questions loom

Written by Chris Dunker

The numbers point to success: Thousands of University of Nebraska-Lincoln students have signed up for and used the new Husker Late Night Ride program.

But Libby Wilkins says the clearest sign comes from what she's hearing at bars and off-campus social events.

"I've heard people say things like, 'I'm pretty sure I'm fine to drive, but I have a free Uber,'" said Wilkins, a senior agricultural leadership major from Ainsworth. "That is exactly what we want to be able to provide for students."

The outgoing UNL student regent and president of the Association of Students of the University of Nebraska said the partnership between the university, Husker Athletics, and ride-hailing company Uber has been more of a hit than anyone imagined.

As of Friday morning, more than 5,900 undergraduate students at UNL have signed up to receive free ride vouchers from Uber. Each voucher, valued at $10, allows students to take a ride within a 3-mile radius of campus between 9 p.m. and 3 a.m.

Since the program started in late January, nearly 13,800 rides have been taken by Husker students, which Wilkins said illustrates how the program is meeting student demand.

Students can simply open their Uber app, hail a ride, and the voucher automatically applies to their fare, she said. If the ride costs more than $10, the student pays the difference, which often amounts to less than $2.

"This is a really tangible thing for students because it's something they already use," Wilkins said. "It isn't just a random program or one that only students in the right circles use. A significant amount of the student body is able to use this in a way that's seamless."

Long history at UNL

The Husker Late Night Ride program, which followed NU on Wheels — better known to many as 475-RIDE — came together at the right moment.

Started in 1999 following the death of UNL student Laura Cockson, who was struck and killed by a drunk driver, NU on Wheels gives students who called the number a free ride anywhere between 7 p.m. and 7 a.m.

Funded by ASUN, the free ride program saw the number of users decline throughout the 2010s following the arrival of several ride-share options in the Capital City, until the student government pulled its funding altogether in 2018-19.

Over the next few years, the number of drunk driver arrests made by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Police Department began to spike, according to data from the department.

Campus officers arrested 20 people on suspicion of driving under the influence of alcohol in 2020, with five of those arrests being students who were enrolled at UNL.

The next year, 2021, UNLPD arrested 47 people (including 12 students) for DUI; that number jumped to 59 (including 15 students) in 2022.

Between 2020 and 2025, nearly 1 in 4 people arrested by UNLPD for DUI were students.

In the meantime, as ASUN continued exploring options to replace NU on Wheels, a breakthrough opened a new pathway: the NU Board of Regents approved the sale of alcoholic drinks at Husker football and volleyball games in October 2024.

To help win approval from ASUN and others ahead of the regents' vote, the athletic department pledged $100,000 from the proceeds to support alcohol and binge-drinking education programs at UNL.

The idea of using revenue generated through beer sales to give Husker students a free ride won overwhelming support among students at the 2025 campus elections, Wilkins said, but the plan languished at the end of the semester and during summer break.

Beginning in the fall, Wilkins set about meeting with Ryan Lahne, assistant vice chancellor in UNL's Student Life office, and Athletic Director Troy Dannen about using the funds as seed money for the Husker Late Night Ride program.

"Troy said 'you can do whatever you want with the money,'" she said.

'Dream program'

In the last few years, Uber has launched partnerships at more than 600 colleges and universities on a wide range of ride voucher programs.

Anushka Lakhani, a go-to-market specialist for Uber for Business — Higher Education, said some of those programs give students a free ride home from a late night work shift or internship. In other places, Uber provides "first and last mile" rides from public transportation like trains.

UNL's late night ride idea has been adopted in other places, including the University of Iowa, Lakhani said, but its rollout and early adoption have the ride-hailing company gushing.

"Nebraska is our dream program in so many ways," Lakhani said.

Schools often put a lot of thought into how they want their programs to operate, she added, but how to get students' attention and interest is often an afterthought.

Wilkins, Lahne and others developed a coordinated social media campaign, a website with frequently asked questions, and got the Husker Late Night Ride program in front of students for a month before launch. Lakhani said that made a huge difference.

"There was a lot of intention and thought into how this was communicated to students that it's almost become a source of truth for me moving forward because we've seen how it's been successful," she said.

When the vouchers became available in January, Husker students snapped them up at a quicker rate than other universities that had rolled out a similar program.

"It has been an amazing program and far exceeded our expectations," Lahne said.

The university maintains a dashboard with a host of data showcasing how the Husker Late Night Ride program is being utilized.

- Most rides (87%) happen on Thursday (20%), Friday (39%), and Saturday (28.3%) night.
- 61% of rides take place before midnight. The busiest hour is between 10-11 p.m., where 23% of rides have happened.
- 1,437 students have used all 5 vouchers made available to them this semester.
- The average ride fare is $11.50, meaning students who use a voucher pay $1.50.
- The biggest tab for which a voucher was applied was nearly $63; the smallest fare was $1.26 cents.
- On average, students ride 2.14 miles, well within the 3-mile radius of City and East Campus.
- The shortest ride recorded is a meager 0.15 miles, or 792 feet, which is roughly the distance between the highest row in North Stadium and the highest row in what is now South Stadium.
- This year, to date, UNLPD has made a total of 12 DUI arrests. Only one has been a student.

Chris Wagner, executive director of Project Extra Mile, which seeks to prevent and reduce alcohol-related harms, said those figures may not include arrests that happen away from campus.

"The fact that arrests are down doesn't mean that students aren't driving impaired -- they just aren't getting caught on campus," said Wagner, who spoke in opposition to the sale of alcohol at Husker events in 2024.

The program may provide a benefit to UNL students, he added, but it could come with some drawbacks as well.

Students may be drinking more because they know they have a ride waiting. Excessive drinking may also contribute to increased sexual assaults, violent crime, property crime, and health problems, Wagner said.

"That's not to say that it's not a good use of funds raised from alcohol sales, but it does gloss over the other harms that these sales cause for students and the broader community," he said.

For now, the program is set to continue. Three weeks after the Husker Late Night Ride started, Wilkins and Lahne sat down to talk. Lahne had good news and bad news.

The good news was the program had proved to be a smash with students. Usage roughly doubles that at Iowa, but it comes with a cost.

UNL had been chewing through the $100,000 provided by Nebraska Athletics at an unsustainable clip.

While an additional $25,000 in private funds was secured to help the university reach the end of the semester (a total in $118,833 has been spent as of April 27), Lahne said changes might have to be made to ensure its survival.

“It’s underfunded,” he said. “Based on the usage we have seen, in the fall, it will either need new funds or be modified to reduce the number of rides a student can receive, or in the geographic footprint where rides can occur.”

Nebraska Athletics has pledged to contribute $100,000 to support the program for the 2026-27 school year – possibly more, according to a spokesman – but Wilkins said students will have to take the lead.

The upcoming graduate who is one of the late-night ride program's biggest boosters but has yet to use it herself, hopes ASUN can work with alumni or donors to ensure more students can find a safe way home.

"If we want this program we think is so beneficial for the student body to continue, we're going to have to find funding," she said. "It's a really important program, and it's been really exciting to see it used so much."

7 takeaways from STAT's investigation into the U.S. alcohol epidemic

Written by Isabella Cueto, Lev Facher

A beer at a ballgame. A cocktail at dinner. Champagne toasts at a wedding.

To most Americans, alcohol is an innocuous part of everyday life, so commonplace as to go unnoticed. But the nation's everyday drug is also the culprit behind its most enduring and overlooked drug crisis.

Drinking, and especially heavy use, is driving an epidemic of injuries, illnesses, and deaths in the United States. Despite recent declines in drinking, alcohol remains the nation's deadliest drug — more deadly than opioids, fentanyl, methamphetamines, or heroin.

Alcohol kills 178,000 Americans each year and sickens countless more. Yet the public, corporations, lawmakers, and federal officials mostly act as though the problem doesn't exist. This widespread denial pervades even the Trump administration, which, more than any administration in recent memory, is attuned to the burden of addiction.

The Deadliest Drug, a new investigative series by STAT, reveals the nation is failing in key areas:

Inconsistent detection

Screening for excessive drinking and related health problems is inconsistent, and tends to flag only severe cases. Many health care providers are still uncomfortable pressing patients on their drinking levels, referring them to treatment, or prescribing medications known to help patients reduce or eliminate alcohol consumption.

Relying on individual willpower

When Americans do get help, they often encounter a one-size-fits-all approach. The U.S. still relies disproportionately on individual willpower, and on the ideology and practices of 12-step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous. While the group has helped millions quit alcohol, its sometimes dogmatic approach has failed many who reject its God-centric bent, experienced emotional or physical abuse at the hands of sponsors, or wished to reduce their drinking instead of cutting out alcohol entirely.

Fragmented treatment infrastructure

More broadly, the nation's treatment infrastructure for excessive alcohol consumption remains fragmented, medications remain underutilized, and harm-reduction strategies long embraced by other countries remain taboo. Even though most cases of alcohol use disorder are mild or moderate, many Americans seeking treatment are forced to choose between labeling themselves "alcoholics" and never drinking again — or foregoing treatment altogether.

Twin epidemic of alcohol and metabolic disease

While the U.S. is not alone in experiencing high rates of alcohol-related harm, it is facing a uniquely troubling twin epidemic of alcohol use and metabolic disease. The ongoing crises of obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease, coupled with alcohol use, have made for a nightmarish liver landscape. More young Americans are dying from liver disease than ever before, even as drinking rates dip to historic lows in those under 50. A growing number of experts believe the combination of alcohol and poor diet is the reason why.

Old problems linger

Over one in 10 pregnant women in the U.S. drink, and experts worry that increasingly relaxed attitudes about alcohol in pregnancy could drive a wave of neurodevelopmental issues estimated to be more common than autism. Despite widespread understanding of the risks of alcohol use during pregnancy, about 25% of pregnant women who drink report having more than four drinks in one occasion, according to STAT's analysis of federal data. They, along with children disabled by alcohol exposure, are especially vulnerable to fall through the cracks of the health care system.

Federal indifference

The investigation shows that since returning to office in January 2025, President Trump has actively undermined what little government infrastructure was dedicated to reducing addiction and alcohol-related harms. To date, his administration's most noteworthy actions on alcohol have consisted of eliminating suggested limits on drinking in federal dietary guidelines, burying a report that showed moderate drinking is harmful to health, and closing an office at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention focused on preventing alcohol-related harms. The administration's signature effort on addiction, the Great American Recovery Initiative, has focused largely on homelessness and opioids, not alcohol.

Influence of industry

STAT has found that the alcohol industry has built significant political, cultural, and economic influence, which it uses to hamper policymaking aimed at reducing drinking and improving public health. Alcohol industry groups' ability to bend policy and science to their benefit is evident in state legislatures, where bills focused on drinking consistently fail to gain support, and in the notably friendly relationship it maintains with federal officials and lawmakers. The trade's reach extends even to ostensibly health-focused advocacy groups, including the American Cancer Society, Governors Highway Safety Association, and Mothers Against Drunk Driving, the nation's most prominent anti-drunk-driving organization.

These alcohol-driven problems and others will continue to plague the country if left unchecked, experts told STAT over the course of more than 100 interviews. Ultimately, if the Trump administration continues to ignore or sideline the epidemic of problem drinking and addiction, it is unlikely to improve Americans' health.

"You can't have MAHA without mental health and addiction," former congressman and addiction treatment advocate Patrick Kennedy — the health secretary's first cousin — told STAT.

Utah's stricter 0.05 BAC limit significantly reduces drunk driving fatalities, analysis finds

Written by Elsevier

A new analysis has found that after Utah lowered the legal blood alcohol concentration (BAC) limit for driving from 0.08 to 0.05 g/dL, alcohol-related crash fatalities declined significantly more in Utah than in its six contiguous states. The findings from the study published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, provide timely evidence that lowering the BAC limit may save lives and point to broad public safety benefits.

Driving under the influence of alcohol remains a major risk factor for motor vehicle crashes, with recent data showing stagnating reductions or a rise in fatalities over the past decade. In 2023, 12,429 crash fatalities in the U.S. involved at least one alcohol-impaired driver. Over the period 2014–2023, alcohol-impaired driving crashes consistently accounted for 28%–32% of all annual traffic fatalities in the U.S.

International research has consistently demonstrated that lowering the legal BAC limit to 0.05 effectively reduces alcohol-related crash injuries and fatalities by 11% or more. Utah was the first U.S. state to lower the legal BAC limit for driving from 0.08 to 0.05—the law was passed in 2017 and took effect in 2018—and remains the only state that enforces the lower limit. To date, all other states maintain a 0.08 threshold.

How the study compared states

Investigators in the current study analyzed national fatal crash data from the Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS) and compared county-level crash fatalities in Utah with those in Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, New Mexico and Wyoming before and after the Utah 0.05 BAC law took effect (2013–2023). For the difference-in-differences analysis, a subsample including only crashes that occurred in 2016 and 2019 was used.

The most important finding was that Utah experienced larger declines in alcohol-related fatalities, while non-alcohol-related fatalities did not show the same policy-related change.

Lead author and co-investigator Kaigang Li, Ph.D., MEd, Department of Health and Exercise Science, Colorado State University, and Colorado School of Public Health, Fort Collins, says, "This is one of the most rigorous U.S.-based evaluations of a 0.05 BAC law using county-level comparative data. At a time when alcohol-impaired driving deaths remain a persistent national public health problem, these findings provide timely evidence that lowering the BAC limit may save lives."

The researchers were highly encouraged to see that reductions were not limited only to drivers near the 0.05 threshold but extended across higher BAC levels as well. This suggests the law may have had a broader deterrent effect on drinking and driving behavior.

Barriers to wider adoption

Despite documented lifesaving policy benefits in Utah and other nations, and strong endorsement from the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), political resistance, public

misunderstanding and cultural norms remain barriers to adopting a national 0.05 BAC limit, the investigators point out.

Lead investigator Federico E. Vaca, MD, MPH, University of California Irvine School of Medicine, Irvine, notes, "In the last decade for which we have federally published U.S. crash data (2014–2023) available, the number of alcohol-impaired driving crash fatalities increased by 25% and the corresponding fatality rate increased by 15%.

"There is just so much opportunity here for collective prevention efforts to reduce serious injury and save more lives on our roadways. Each year of delay in enacting this policy represents a lost opportunity to prevent thousands of fatalities among drivers, passengers and all road users."

Li concludes, "Our findings suggest that stronger impaired-driving laws can influence drivers' behavior and reduce preventable traffic deaths. Utah's experience shows important and additional evidence for policymakers nationwide."

Publication details

Kaigang Li et al, TEMPORARY REMOVAL: Utah's Move from 0.08 to 0.05 BAC Per Se Policy: Effects on Driver Crash Fatalities Compared to Contiguous States, American Journal of Preventive Medicine (2026). DOI: 10.1016/j.amepre.2026.108380

UNK won't sell alcohol at football games this fall due to insurance costs

Written by Aaron Bonderson

The high cost of insurance is – once again – putting a pause on alcohol sales at University of Nebraska at Kearney football games. The college's vendor is required to have a $5 million insurance policy for alcohol sales. Athletic Director Marc Bauer said that benchmark is too high to try to sell alcohol at UNK Loper football games, which average about 3,000 fans per contest.

"I think that's really what made it challenging for our third-party vendor to even want to get involved," Bauer said, "because I don't think they would generate enough revenue to cover their expenses."

The contractor is Nightlife Concepts LLC, a local company that owns a bar and restaurant called Cunningham Journal.

Last year, Nightlife had planned to sell alcohol in an attempt to add to the game day experience and perhaps attract more casual football fans to the stadium. However, on the day before the first UNK home game, the university discovered Nightlife would need at least $5 million in liquor liability coverage, $4 million more than it currently was covered for.

"At the time, it was a little frustrating, because we had spent so much time and effort and energy preparing for that day, and it didn't happen," Bauer said.

He said the athletic department is still "very pleased with the game day atmosphere that we have today." That includes allowing fans and alumni to bring their own alcohol into a designated area outside of the stadium for tailgating.

"You don't have to have alcohol present to have a great time, to have a great experience with your family, and that's kind of where we're at right now," Bauer said.

UNK spokesperson Todd Gottula said the school talked with fans about their thoughts heading into this year.

"We've heard both: 'We would love to have that opportunity to have a beverage during games,' and the majority of our fans are like, 'You know what, I can take it or leave it."

As for its peers, Bauer estimates that eight of 10 schools in UNK's conference currently sell alcohol in some capacity in their respective football stadiums. Of those eight Mid-America Intercollegiate Athletics Association schools, Bauer said at least two are able to generate a profit from alcohol sales: Central Oklahoma and Central Missouri. The latter also sells alcohol for other sports, he said. But in football, those schools' football stadiums are a bit bigger than Cope Stadium in Kearney.

UNK could try to sell alcohol at some point in the future, Bauer said, but the university will proceed with a dry venue this year.

“We have a policy for alcohol sales,” the athletic director said. “It's on the website. We'll always have that policy, as far as I'm concerned, and maybe at a later date in the future, maybe somebody might want to use it and sell alcohol.

Omaha man accused of DUI in crash that killed 10-year-old, 5-year-old faces upgraded charges

Written by Jake Anderson, Waverle Monroe

OMAHA, Neb. — Prosecutors said the 28-year-old man accused of driving under the influence in a crash that killed two children in Omaha will face upgraded charges in the case.

Tanner Hunt will be charged with two counts of motor vehicle homicide while driving under the influence in the deadly crash.

The crash happened Thursday near 114th Street and West Center Road. According to police, a Subaru Impreza was attempting to turn when it was hit by an eastbound Chevrolet Malibu. The impact of the crash ripped the Subaru in half.

Omaha police said 10-year-old Prestin Strassenburg and 5-year-old Zaiden Strassenburg were killed as a result of the crash.

Prosecutors filed to upgrade Hunt's charges after Zaiden died from his injuries earlier this week.

"We already filed one count of motor vehicle homicide for one young boy and we're filing a second one now that the other boy has passed. ... We're filing it today but it won't actually be done until Monday when we have a hearing in front of the judge saying we want to amend the charge," Douglas County Attorney Don Kleine told KETV.

Earlier this week, a judge ordered Hunt to have no contact with any of the victims or their family, and said he will be placed on GPS monitoring and into the 24/7 sobriety programming if he is able to post bond.

Court documents uncovered by KETV Investigates show that this is not Hunt's first DUI.

Prosecutors said Hunt was driving at about 98 mph one second before the impact and had a blood alcohol level of .095.

Hunt is scheduled to appear in court Monday for the amended charge.

Omaha Bike Week co-founder killed in drunk driving crash; community mourns during his own event

Written by Brenna Kiefner

OMAHA, Neb. (WOWT) - Ryan Hay, co-founder of Omaha Bike Week, was killed early Thursday morning after a driver police say had a blood alcohol level more than twice the legal limit struck his motorcycle.

Police say Bailey Burr, 31, of Omaha, ran a left turn on 144th Street and drove directly into Hay's path. Hay was ejected from his motorcycle and transported to a hospital, where he was later pronounced dead. Burr now faces motor vehicle homicide and DUI charges.

Hay and co-founder Michael Allen launched Omaha Bike Week in 2024 with a Facebook post inviting riders to come together and celebrate. The event went viral.

"He loves motorcycles, soul life…he hit me up, said 'I gotta be part of this expansion, you need me.' And I did. We worked really good together," Allen said.

Those who knew Hay described him as someone who showed up consistently for the people around him. Derek Slechta of Stocks and Bonds, where Hay was a regular for four years, remembered him as a pillar of the community.

"If you needed it and he had it, he would give it to you. And if he didn't have it, he'd find a way to help. He was there for his community — an epitome of what you want in your community," Slechta said.

Hay's death comes in the middle of Omaha Bike Week. His motorcycle, freshly detailed, was placed outside the venue as a tribute. Proceeds from the event's raffle, T-shirt sales, and poker run are being directed to his family.

Allen said the week's remaining events — including a car night and a Saturday car show — are being held in Hay's memory.

"He was a huge car and motorcycle guy…we are having a car night and Saturday we're going to have a car show as well. But everything here, all these events, is in memory of Ryan," Allen said.

Hay's death is the latest in a string of deadly drunk driving crashes in Omaha this month. Chris Wagner, executive director of Project Extra Mile, said the toll of alcohol-related crashes in Nebraska extends well beyond high-profile cases.

"We have nearly 70 Nebraskans every year die from alcohol-related crashes. They don't all make the headlines — but that's a lot of lives that can be saved if policymakers have the wherewithal to stand up and pass what we know works," Wagner said.

Omaha Bike Week runs through next Saturday and is open daily at 11 a.m.

Local view: Preventable tragedies demand action

Written by Chris Wagner

On July 9, at around 6:30 p.m., tragedy struck two young boys, their family, and our entire community. According to the Omaha Police Department, an impaired driver, who later tested above the legal limit, was traveling at nearly 100 mph when he slammed into a vehicle that was attempting to make a turn. The force of the crash was so severe that it split the impacted vehicle in half. In the back seat of that vehicle were two brothers, ages 10 and 5, with their entire lives ahead of them. Despite the efforts of emergency responders, both boys later died from their injuries.

We cannot allow ourselves to become numb to tragedies like this. There is much more we can and must do to prevent excessive alcohol consumption and impaired driving that leads to tragedies like this.

There is no single solution to a problem that has plagued our state and nation causing 178,000 deaths and nearly $250 billion in economic costs each year, but there are evidence-based solutions that have worked to significantly reduce excessive alcohol consumption and its harms in other states and around the world. Many of them are policies that lawmakers can enact to change the environment in which individual decisions are made around alcohol consumption.

Some states are much better at changing that environment than others. They restrict how alcohol is sold, how it is advertised, and tax it more heavily to discourage binge and heavy drinking, leading to lower excessive consumption rates. Nebraska is not one of those states — over the past two decades, we consistently rank in the Top 10 worst binge drinking states in the nation. The latest data available shows that we are the third worst. This is due to outdated tax rates that haven't been increased to keep pace with inflation, tax cuts on emerging types of alcohol, hyper availability of alcohol in neighborhoods, and a lack of swift and meaningful penalties for illegal alcohol sales. Consequently, over 1,000 Nebraskans die each year due to excessive alcohol consumption, and our state has over $1 billion in economic costs annually.

With regard to alcohol-impaired driving, studies have shown that a person can drive up to 2,000 times while under the influence of alcohol before being arrested. One study found that Nebraskans reported driving while intoxicated at a rate of 955 episodes (from Point A to Point B) per 1,000 population — that's nearly double the national average and the second worst rate at the time of the study.

Between 2015 and 2024, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reported an average of 69 alcohol-involved fatality crashes in Nebraska involving a driver with a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of 0.08 or higher, this is approximately 28% of all fatal crashes in that timespan. An additional 14 fatalities per year involved a driver with a BAC between 0.01-0.08%. The Nebraska Highway Safety Office also reports an average of 572 serious and minor injury crashes involving an impaired driver between 2021 and 2025. These are injuries that seriously alter people's lives forever and could have been prevented with evidence-based policies.

Higher taxes reduce excessive drinking, binge drinking, youth alcohol use, impaired driving, and alcohol-related deaths. During the last Legislature, there was a bill that would have been monumental in reducing alcohol-related harms. It would have increased the state sales tax on alcoholic beverages by 10% and used a portion of the projected $133 million in revenue to treat and prevent excessive alcohol use. That measure did not make it out of committee despite the state needing to address a $640 million deficit.

We've seen higher taxes work in other states. Maryland implemented a 3% alcohol sales tax in 2011 and found that adult binge drinking declined by 17% over the following five years. High school alcohol use fell by 26%, youth binge drinking dropped by 28%, and alcohol-positive drivers between the ages of 21-34 declined by 12%. A 2009 tax increase in Illinois reduced fatal alcohol-related motor vehicle crashes by 26%.

Policymakers cannot keep passing alcohol industry priorities and expect law enforcement to make alcohol-related crashes and crime disappear. We need our elected officials to recognize their role in preventing these harms and pass evidence-based policies that will save lives and make our communities safer.